

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 978

RC 022 889

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TITLE The Influence of Institutional Culture on Institutional Choice and Post-Freshman Persistence of American Indian/Alaska Native Students at a Bible College.
PUB DATE 2001-02-08
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented to the Annual Graduate Student Conference on American Indian Research (1st, Phoenix, AZ, February 8, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alaska Natives; *American Indian Education; American Indians; Church Related Colleges; *College Choice; *College Freshmen; Higher Education; Qualitative Research; *School Culture; *School Holding Power; Small Colleges; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *American Indian Students; Sense of Community

ABSTRACT

This study examined American Indian and Alaska Native students' college choice and persistence beyond the freshman year at American Indian College. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 29 students from 18 tribes attending American Indian College, a very small Bible college affiliated with the Assemblies of God and located in Phoenix, Arizona. This college had a high freshman retention rate of 86 percent. Four concepts were identified that affected institutional choice and persistence. This paper focuses on one of them--institutional culture. Positive influences on choosing the college were the high percentage of American Indian students (78 percent), small school size, a low student/teacher ratio, and the active recruitment of American Indian students by the college. Positive influences in the retention of students were regular chapel services, ministry outreach, the development of close friendships among students and staff, and faculty validation and encouragement. Negative influences were a lack of religious programming, religious differences, faculty invalidation, culturally insensitive faculty, difficulties with residential staff, and concerns with the rules. Recommendations related to the findings are presented. (Contains 30 references.) (TD)

The Influence of Institutional Culture on Institutional Choice and
Post-Freshman Persistence of American Indian/Alaska Native
Students at a Bible College

By

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A Paper Presented to the
First Annual Graduate Student Conference
on American Indian Research

Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of institutional culture on post-freshman persistence of AI/AN students at a Bible college. American Indian College is a Bible college with a 78% AI/AN population (Spring 2000) with an enrollment at that time of 81 students. The site selection is significant because the college's 1999 freshman retention rate was 86%.

A qualitative study conducted by Saggio (2000) using focus groups yielded four grounded concepts related to AI/AN institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year. This paper presents the findings of one of those grounded concepts, the influence of institutional culture. Institutional culture was found to have a positive influence on both choosing a Bible college, as well as positive and negative influences towards persistence. Positive influence of institutional culture towards persistence included chapel services, ministry outreach, close friendships, faculty validation and encouragement. Negative influences of institutional culture included lack of programming, religious differences, faculty invalidation, culturally insensitive faculty, difficulties with residential staff, and concerns with the rules.

Conclusions and recommendations are provided for this institution and other similar institutions on how they can accommodate the needs of AI/AN students within the context of providing a positive institutional culture.

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Introduction

The AI/AN population has been determined to be significantly at risk in terms of collegiate persistence (Astin, 1982; Pavel, 1991; Wright & Tierney, 1991; Tierney, 1992; Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Benjamin et al., 1993; Colbert, 1999; Saggio, 2000).

Accordingly, it is no surprise that approximately 75% of all AI/AN students who begin college drop out before completing a baccalaureate degree (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992; Wells, 1997). Wells (1997) determined that the AI/AN freshman retention rate was 46.7%, meaning that nearly one out of every two AI/AN students enrolling in college drop out before they begin their sophomore year. Many of the problems experienced by AI/AN students begin long before their matriculation in college (Dehyle, 1992; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Demmert, 1996).

A great deal of research has been done in the public sector of higher education examining the factors of AI/AN retention and persistence (Falk & Aitken, 1984; Wright & Tierney, 1991; Pavel, 1991; Tierney, 1992; Benjamin et al., 1993; Melchior-Walsh, 1994; Wells, 1997; Colbert, 1999). However, at the present time there is little or no research on how AI/AN students do at in private sectarian colleges such as American Indian College, the focus of Saggio's (2000) study. This paper focuses in on how the influence of institutional culture affects both institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year for AI/AN students at a Bible College.

Method

Saggio's (2000) study utilized a qualitative approach through the use of four focus groups that generated data that was used to construct conceptual models to display and contextualize the findings. Focus groups and post-sessions were transcribed from audio tapes and the data was inductively analyzed using Folio VIEWS 4.2 (Open Market, 1998), a text-based management software used in qualitative research. The data analysis yielded initial taxonomies (Spradley, 1979) which were then modified into conceptual models. Although their specific approaches were not used, ideas were gleaned from previous cognate studies conducted by Melchior-Walsh (1994) and Jalomo (1995).

Site Description

All of the focus groups were conducted at the American Indian College, a Bible college affiliated with the Assemblies of God and located in Phoenix, Arizona. 78% of the 81 students were AI/AN at the time of the study (Spring 2000). A total of 29 students were interviewed, comprising 47% of the AI/AN population at the school (N=62). 18 of the 27 tribes at the school were represented in the focus groups. The tribes included in the study are as follows: White Mountain Apache, Navajo, Eskimo, (Inupiat), Hopi, Flathead Crow, Pima, Tohono O'odham, Chumash, Eskimo (Tsimpsiam), Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Kiowa, Comanche, Ute, Quinault, Assinaboine, and Northern Cheyenne.

The site selection was significant because of the high freshman retention rate of 86% (American Indian College, Office of Institutional Research, 2000) from the 1999 academic year, just prior to Saggio's (2000) study.

Results

The results of Saggio's (2000) study revealed four grounded concepts that affect institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year. The grounded concepts were family, spirituality, life experiences, and institutional culture. This paper focuses exclusively on discussion of the influence of institutional culture on institutional choice and persistence beyond the freshman year.

Institutional Culture

The grounded concept of the influence of institutional culture captures how students chose the institution and how they persevered based on their interactions within the college's environment and culture.

Ethnicity of Students

Students were very cognizant of the ethnic makeup of the college they attended before arriving on campus. For a number of students, the presence of other Indian students was instrumental in their decision to enroll at an Indian Bible college. This female student wanted to attend an Indian college so she wouldn't feel alienated, "I got the idea of going where there was a bunch of Natives so I wouldn't feel alienated, I guess."

Small Size

Several students mentioned the small size of the college as a positive influence in their college choice. In addition to the Christian orientation, the attraction of the Bible college was its size to this student, "I chose [the Bible college] because it was a small college. I've always known about the college and I just wanted a place that was Christian."

Student-Teacher Ratio

This female student shared her need to avoid becoming just another number or face in the crowd to her instructors:

I didn't want to be just a number or known as [my] last name. I like the closeness and [I'll] be getting the help with all [my] teachers as well.

Because sometimes you'll get into bigger colleges and you'll get frustrated and back out because you don't know what you're doing.

Recruitment Strategies

Many of the focus group participants were very impressed with the efforts to recruit them as students. One cited one of the college's former recruiters as being very instrumental in her coming to the college:

... every time I'd see [the recruiter] he'd [say,] "Well, here's the card and here's a brochure and here's this and that." He was like one of the main ones who would just keep asking me about coming to school here too.

Positive Influence of Programs

As students shared their stories and experiences they found things about the institutional culture that were both positive and negative. In particular, some of the programs had a positive effect on retention and were cited by students as helping them to persist.

Since the College sees itself as a training ground for AI/AN ministers, it emphasizes activities such as chapel, missions trips, as well as local outreaches to expose students to the college's main purpose of training Christian leaders. Thus, the bulk of the college's activities have a religious emphasis.

Chapel Services

Students were required to attend chapel as part of their total spiritual enrichment. The chapel services strived to spiritually challenge the students while giving them a community worship experience that brought the entire campus together at least once a day in the morning. For this female student, chapel services were a mainstay and she reflected positively on their influence in her spiritual formation:

For me it would have to be the chapel services that we had Monday through Friday and also on Sunday night and those were the encouraging

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times that we would come together as the student body and basically kind of run our own service with the help of an instructor . . .

Ministry Outreaches

Closely related to chapel was the ministry outreaches conducted by the college that are student-directed and range from visits to local reservation communities to summer trips as far away as the Philippines and Outer Mongolia. For this young man, ministry trips were an integral part of the collegiate experience, "The first year it was the ministries--the different ministries that we get on the weekend and the trips that we had. That kept me here."

Lack of Programming

Although some of the programming created positive experiences for some focus group participants, the lack of programming created a very negative experience for some others. This female student was displeased with the lack of activities that were available on campus to the students. Having come from a very active lifestyle she found difficulty adapting to what she perceived as a very quiet campus:

I used to hang out with my friends until like eleven, twelve and then finally go home and not even go to sleep at all sometimes. That's just the person I was, and I hardly slept. I would like to have fun and here it's like so quiet. Everybody is in their room. You hardly see anybody outside at

times. It's like, what's going on? And come to find out there's nothing to do.

Close Friendships

As a small, residential campus students, faculty, and staff are all in close proximity to each other and interact closely on a daily basis. Previously, many students recounted how the size of the college and student/teacher ratio helped them to decide to enroll in the college. Once students became a part of the college community, some of them recounted how close friendships were very positive influences on them persisting at the college. For example, this male student recalled how the sense of community was especially important to him during his freshman year, "... the experience here. Knowing that there [were] a lot of friends here and being around them, ... the community feeling of it."

Religious Differences

Having close friends with a common social and religious bond was extremely important for the students. However, for devout students, having other students on campus that did not share their religious fervor made it very discouraging at times. This student reflected back on how the presence of students who did not share his Christian value system was very disappointing:

I think the only thing that really discouraged me were times when people who were not Christians slipped through the cracks and they got into the

school and you were expecting them to be Christian and you were expecting them to be these really nice people. . . . [Yet] you have these people come on and put on the halo act for about maybe two or three days and all of a sudden you see them cussing, doing things that you wouldn't think they'd be doing.

Faculty Validation and Encouragement

Not surprisingly, the focus group participants had much to say about the faculty. As a Bible college, the majority of the faculty members are ordained ministers within the Assemblies of God. In addition to their individual subject specializations, many of them are viewed in their pastoral roles, frequently called upon for counsel and spiritual guidance by the students. This female student lauds one of her instructors for the caring way in which he took time to visit her dying father in the nursing home:

[Instructor] was a real major role player in my freshman year, not only on campus academic and class-wise. I lost my father my freshman year and he took time, even in the middle of the night, to come to the nursing home to pray, to meet my family, to call me on the phone. [He] and his wife were praying for us at home and then even when I returned to campus afterwards he was there to encourage me and to tell me, "Just hang in there. Get through the semester," and everything would be OK.

Faculty Invalidation

This study has already shown that faculty members provided validation, which enhanced the retention of students beyond the freshman year. This is consistent with Rendón's (1994) research in which she indicated that faculty who validate may have a positive impact on student retention and success. Conversely, as the following exemplars show, faculty who did not validate students were seen as negatively influencing retention. In other words, students indicated that just as positive feedback fueled their desire to persist, negative feedback negated that desire:

Yeah, he was teaching [Subject] and he really made it rough for me. I really did not like him. He kind of made me feel like I was dumb. I couldn't get [the Subject]. I was never going to get it. He would always walk around looking mean. I just didn't like that. So he was really negative.

Culturally Insensitive Faculty

Experiences with culturally insensitive faculty were closely related to the experiences of students who did not receive faculty validation. Although many students at the college were very fond of their faculty--most of whom were Anglo, some students expressed frustration at faculty members. Frustration arose with instructors who were culturally insensitive and did not seem to understand the different dynamics that operate

in the lives of AI/AN students. This student shares her frustration with culturally untrained faculty:

... new teachers that come [and] don't know anything about Native Americans. They don't know their lifestyle. Anglos, they interrupt you when you're speaking. They cut you off when you're still speaking. I don't know if I'm speaking for everybody but when a Native American [is] speaking to somebody, you listen and when they speak to you, you listen and you never look them straight in the eye. Some of the people are, "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" Or you know they don't listen to what you say. They don't wait for you to stop and they interrupt you as fast as they can because they have a thought, but they don't hold onto it. Sometimes I find that very offensive ... like, are you angry with me?

Difficulties With Residential Staff

Students also cited some concerns with residential staff members as well. This female student thought the residential staff was overzealous at times in their enforcement of rules, such as curfew times:

I don't know how to explain it but ... if you wanted to come in late like because I have family here and I would be out with them [the staff would ask] "Why? Why can't you come back early?" Then I'd think, "Like who are you

to ask me? I know you're a [residence staff member] and that you're responsible, but I'm responsible telling you who I'm with and when I'll be back."

Concerns With Rules

Some students were unhappy with the rules of the college. In some cases, students were shocked by what they thought were archaic and overly strict guidelines on campus. This male student compared the campus to juvenile hall:

I was kind of in culture shock when I first got here, and I felt like I was trapped in a little gate. I felt I was in juvenile hall or something. . . . the rules, the school, different rules that they made--curfew. . . .

Not all students thought the campus's rules were too strict. In fact, some students thought that enforcement of the guidelines needed to be strengthened. One female student was quite firm in her declaration that the rules should be consistently enforced:

I think rules need to be enforced and I think that's one of the things that has been lacking is that we have been treating, especially freshmen, like babies. We've been treating them like kids, "Oh, it's their first year. We should comfort their needs." Well, you come to this college knowing you're away from home. You better start living as an adult. When you

come here, before you sign that document, when you're filling out that application, you're saying, "I'm going to follow these rules. I'm going to follow everything [the college] has to offer me and I read the regulations." You're signing that, and nobody is forcing you to sign that contract there.

Figure 1 on the next page details the role of institutional culture in choosing a college and persistence. Both the positive and negative influences are displayed in the model.

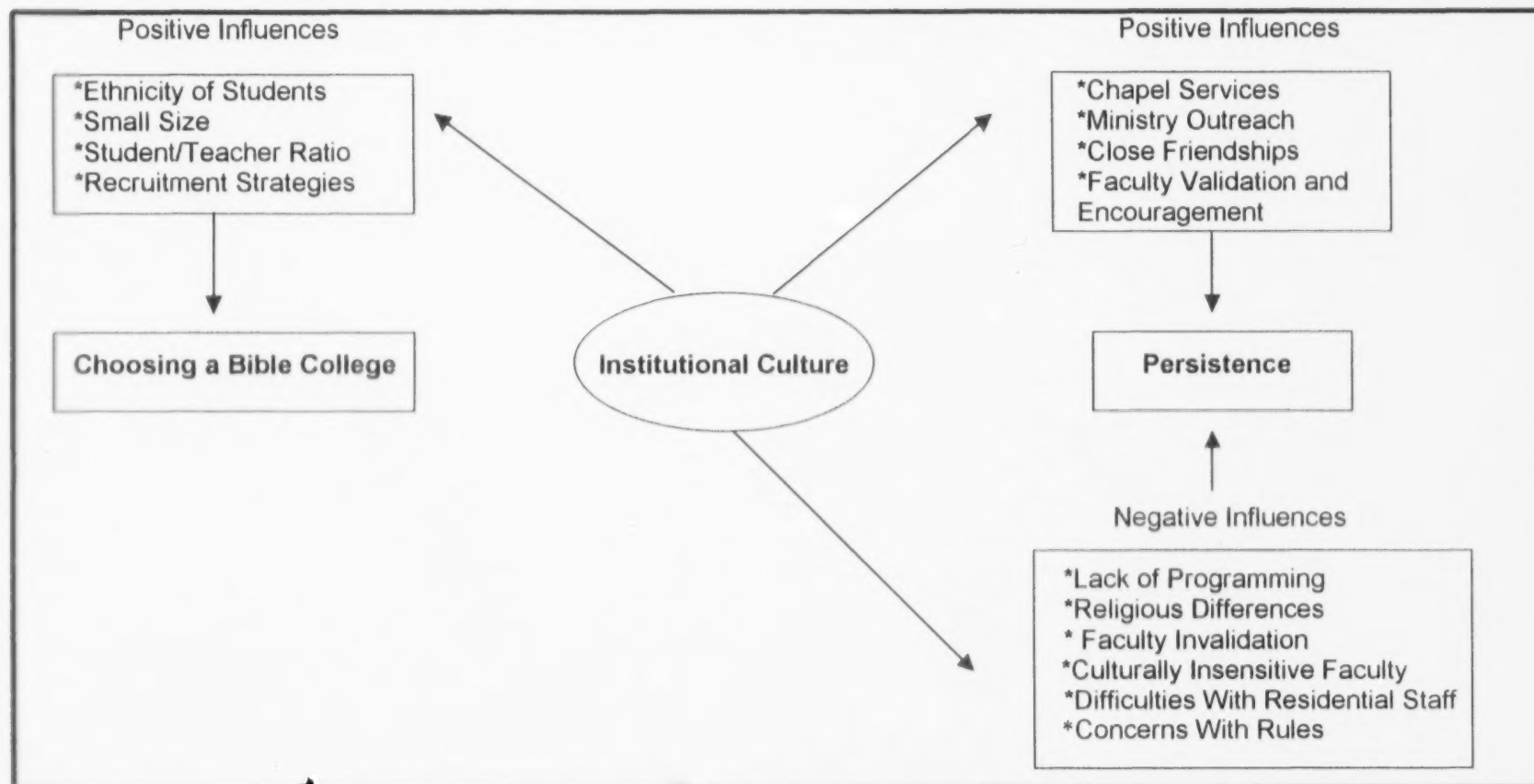


Figure 1: Positive and negative influences of institutional culture in choosing a college and student persistence

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on Saggio's (2000) findings, researchers need to become more keenly aware of those pre-collegiate institutional culture experiences that impact AI/AN students and present these findings to the higher educational community so that student affairs professionals and teaching faculty can implement the type of cognitive, affective, and relational experiences within the campus environment that will help retain AI/ANs.

Institutions wishing to draw a significant population of AI/AN students should strive to develop excellent faculty that understand the need to validate students (Rendón & Jalomo, 1993; Rendón, 1994) and know how to serve as cultural mediators and translators (de Anda, 1984). Faculty and staff members who aren't culturally trained may preclude retention and so institutions need to hire carefully as well as train those faculty, staff, and administrators to be sensitive to the needs of AI/AN students.

Activities such as chapel services and ministry outreaches had a strong appeal to the spiritual needs of the students. Institutions wishing to draw AI/AN students should recognize the strong spirituality that many prospective students have and create programming that will meet the spiritual needs of the constituency that they wish to draw. However, programming needs must go beyond just religious activities; schools need to develop athletic programs and other extracurricular activities that will increase involvement (Astin, 1984, 1985a, & 1985b) and both formal and informal integration into the social fabric of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1987, & 1993).

Finally, institutions that will promote a student population that is as homogeneous as possible should develop a strong, central mission statement in its institutional

expectations so that the students are not dichotomized by competing philosophies and divergent viewpoints on acceptable moral and cultural practices. This will be especially difficult since many institutions strive for a culturally diverse population even within the AI/AN constituency that they serve. This may be somewhat easier for tribal schools and institutions that draw from a specific tribe or region.

Policy analysts should advocate legislation that will adequately fund institutions that serve AI/AN students to ensure that the type of positive institutional experiences mentioned can continue to take place and be expanded, especially social and extracurricular activities that help integrate students into the institutional fabric. As Tierney (1991 & 1992) and Wright and Tierney (1991) point out, institutions must adapt to the needs of AI/AN students, not the other way around.

This paper has shown that there are AI/AN students who can persist beyond the pivotal freshman year and details how some of them have done it at one institution, a Bible college. It is imperative that other institutions work harder to ensure that AI/AN students will be able to successfully become a part of American higher education. The academy will benefit immeasurably by doing so.

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